

2010 Review of Books

Previously: [2009](#), [2008](#), [2007](#), [2006](#)

Unlinked means I recommend against getting it. Linked and italicized means it's actively recommended. Linked but not italicized is somewhere in between. The ordering is not entirely accurate.

[*Secrets*](#) by Daniel Ellsberg

A fantastic book. Ellsberg turns out to be an incredible writer and he tells not only his own incredible story of the fight to release the Pentagon Papers (did you know the *New York Times* actually stole them from his house?), but, even more interestingly, recounts a great deal of fascinating personal experience about what it was like working with McNamara and Kissinger and trying to maintain your sanity in the highest levels of government.

With the WikiLeaks cables in the news, this book is more relevant than ever. And personally, I can't wait until Ellsberg's next book, *The American Doomsday Machine*, comes out. ([Here's an excerpt](#) from back when he planned to publish it online; since then [Bloomsbury snapped it up](#).)

Also, be sure to check out [these comments](#) from Davies and Galbraith.

[*Bright-Sided*](#) by Barbara Ehrenreich

A principled opposition to positive thinking has always been a common Ehrenreich theme and here she expands it to book-length, delivering exactly what you'd expect. The good news is that it's trenchant and witty, the bad news is that if you read a lot of Ehrenreich you probably know just what's coming.

[*Scientist in the Crib*](#) by Allison Gopnik, Andrew N. Meltzoff, Patricia K. Kuhl

Gopnik et al. summarize the findings of their wave of infant research — namely that infants are trying to puzzle things out through experiments rather than just sitting there waiting for their brains to grow. Gopnik, as you'd expect, is a good writer, but their attempts to link their research with philosophy are a bit strained and the research is still weak enough that the book doesn't quite feel like it pays off the title.

Predictably Irrational by Dan Ariely

Everybody's reading it, but that doesn't mean you have to. A collection of fairly mundane behavioral psychology experiments. If you're really so deluded as to believe people aren't predictably irrational, it's not clear to me how a mere book could possibly help you.

[*A Bee Stung Me So I Killed All The Fish*](#) [PDF] by George Saunders

I love Saunders. I read [pretty much everything he's written](#) this year. This collection features some of his sillier pieces.

[*The Braindead Megaphone*](#) by George Saunders

Saunders is great, but he hasn't quite honed his nonfiction talents the way he has with his fiction. Some fantastic pieces, some fascinating ones, and some that don't quite work.

[*Prince of the Marshes*](#) by Rory Stewart

I occasionally have this fantasy, while reading the news, that whatever person I'm reading about has been fired and, through some miraculous fluke, I have been given their job. Would I make a hash of it? Or, would by naive mind and outsider's expertise allow me to do it in a fascinating new way?

In this book, Rory Stewart describes what happened when he was made a colonial governor of a province in Iraq. Brilliant fellow that he is, he does a remarkably good job all things considered, but also writes a questioning, soul-searching, fascinating book about the experience that highlights what an impossible task it really is.

[*False Profits: Recovering from the Bubble Economy*](#) by Dean Baker

A short, clear book on why the economy failed, who did it, and how to set it right by someone who was absolutely right about it all along. If you only want to read one book about the economic crisis, this would be an excellent choice.

[*The Accidental Theorist*](#) by Paul Krugman

A collection of Krugman's columns for *Slate*. It was before he really came off his neoliberal high, but after he learned to write, so while they're not always right they're almost always delightful (and *Slate* gave him a lot more freedom to be playful than the *Times* does). A very fun book about a wide range of issues in economics. (Here's [a nice review](#) from Brad DeLong.)

[*The Political Brain*](#) by Drew Westen

A decent book that could have been great if it had a real editor. There are really three things in here: 1) some fantastic examples of what Democrats *should* say if they have any spine (they're the kind of political propaganda Lakoff would write if Lakoff could write political propaganda), 2) some pretty bogus fMRI experiments to give the text in (1) the illusion of being backed in hard science, 3) several hundred pages of pointless rambling and repetition. If only an editor could have at least removed (3).

[*Get Out The Vote*](#) by Donald Green and Alan Gerber

Every year, thousands of Americans head out onto the streets to knock on their neighbors' doors and remind them to vote. Does any of it have any effect? Green and Gerber had the bright idea of running an experiment to see: Randomize the houses and ask the canvassers to knock on half of them and ignore the other half. Then, check the voting records (which are public) to see how many people in each group voted. The difference can tell you if you made a difference.

This brilliant idea sparked a whole field of experimental research about getting out the vote, which Green and Gerber summarize in this short book, aimed at some mix of scientists and political professionals.

[Eating the Dinosaur](#) by Chuck Klosterman

Absolutely fantastic. Could hardly put it down. Chuck Klosterman is definitely in the running for greatest living essayist. The book is a collection of essays, but not, as far as I can tell, essays that were ever published anywhere else. They're each just magical gems that fit together just perfectly. I even liked the stuff about football (and I've never seen a game of football).

I liked this so much I went on to read all his other books in reverse chronological order:

[Chuck Klosterman IV](#) by Chuck Klosterman

Great, but not quite as great.

[Killing Yourself in Order to Live](#) by Chuck Klosterman

Merely interesting.

[Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs](#) by Chuck Klosterman

Pretty good.

But I could not read either *Downtown Owl* (his novel) or *Fargo Rock City*. The rest I couldn't put down. I guess start with *Eating the Dinosaur* and see how far you get.

[Doubt is Their Product](#) by David Michaels

There are a vast array of government agencies, like the EPA and OSHA, whose job is to protect Americans by examining the science and outlawing things that hurt people. But what if the bad guys get to make up the science? David Michaels examines the whole industry of scientists-for-hire that try to manufacture doubt about the harms that big business commits. The title comes from a tobacco company memo and the tobacco companies are infamous for trying to shed doubt on the studies attacking their products, but the tactics they invented have now spread to every little chemical additive.

Michaels is now head of OSHA. On the one hand, it's great that such a corporate critic has such an influential position. On the other hand, this book is written in the style you'd expect from someone who could become head of OSHA: it's cautious, not polemical, and obsessed with proving the details, rather than the bigger picture.

[Why Not Socialism?](#) by G.A. Cohen

A great little book from the late philosopher Jerry Cohen. Not quite as great as [his comments about the shmooos](#), but a wonderful (and, sadly, all too rare) attempt to get people thinking about what socialism really means and whether it would be practical.

[Free Schools](#) by Jonathan Kozol

An angry little book not about how bad the school system is, like Kozol's usual beat, but about the people trying to change it. Both the folks, like Kozol, going into the inner city and trying to start new schools and the others running away to the land to frolic in freedom. Certainly a time capsule from the 1970s, but a fascinating one.

[Making Movies](#) by Sidney Lumet

A fairly self-absorbed book about what it means to make a movie. Some decent details about the practicalities in here, but mixed in with a lot of random musing and personal reflection.

[The Persistence of Poverty](#) by Charles Karelis

I feel like I've written so much about this book, but none of it appears to have made it to this blog. A great little book, just enough to explain one big idea and how it overturns what you think about classical economics and poverty and much else besides. Here's [a quick bit](#) from Matt Yglesias on it.

Caught Between Two Worlds: The Diary of a Lowell Mill Girl

Mill by David Macaulay

I don't understand why everyone loves Macaulay so.

Belles of New England

[The Industrial Worker](#) by Norman Ware

A fascinating history about how mill girls and shoemakers invented socialism and fought for it in the early days of the republic, before Jefferson's dream of independent men was crushed by the onslaught of industrialization.

[Acme Novelty Library, #19](#) by Chris Ware

Chris Ware is magic. This book consists mostly of a chapter from the work-in-progress *Rusty Brown*, which I was initially skeptical about, but turns out to be just amazingly great. And *Building Stories* is incredible too.

Ware's method is to publish a page each week or so in a weekly paper (the Sunday *New York Times*, the *Chicago Reader*), then redraw the entire chapter and send it out as an edition of the *Novelty Library*, then redraw it a third time when the entire book is published. So this is a way of getting intermediate results, but you could just wait for the final books themselves (if they are ever finished).

[The Art of Lobbying](#) by Bertram Levine

A guide by a practitioner, for practitioners. Not great, but you can pick up a little bit of the flavor of the job from reading what the insiders say.

[Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization](#) by John Searle

Brilliant. [My review is here.](#)

[The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger](#) by Wilkinson and Pickett

Not as good as I was hoping, but still a compelling case for equality with a vast array of data.

Women at Work

[Loom and Spindle](#) by Harriet Jane Hanson Robinson

A fantastic memoir of a fantastic time. Shows how radical even the moderate mill girls were.

[Priceless: The Myth of Fair Value and How to Take Advantage of It](#) by William Poundstone

Poundstone is one of the great science writers of all time. Here he takes on behavioral economics at the very top of his game. Full of fascinating ideas.

[Influence](#) by Robert Cialdini

Covers the usual results of the science on persuasion in a decent and clear way.

[Education and the Cult of Efficiency](#) by Raymond E. Callahan

Proof that business has been trying to take over education for over a century.

[On Writing](#) by Stephen King

Nothing earth-shattering, but it turns out Stephen King is actually a good writer. I honestly had no idea.

[Schooling in Capitalist America](#) (reread) by Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis

The best book on the real meaning of school.

[Becoming Attached](#) (reread) by Robert Karen

One of my favorite books of all time. Probably the best work of science writing I've ever read.

[Moral Politics](#) (reread) by George Lakoff

The best book on American politics.

[Unconditional Parenting](#) (reread) by Alfie Kohn

[How Children Fail](#) (reread) by John Holt

An amazing book on education.

[The Lobbyists](#) by Jeffrey Birnbaum

[Dumbing Us Down](#) by John Taylor Gatto

[Winning Your Election the Wellstone Way](#) by Jeff Blodgett and Bill Lofy and others

Really just a more-detailed version of *Politics the Wellstone Way*.

[Bonfire of the Vanities](#) by Tom Wolfe

Absolutely fantastic. A rare must-read novel — packed full of information about society, journalism, activism, race, etc. I can't convey just how good it really is. It's like *The Power Broker* of fiction.

[The Checklist Manifesto](#) by Atul Gawande

Not a bad book by any means, but its constrained focus means it's not quite as thrilling as Gawande's other books. It ends up mostly being a series of stories about how great checklists can be. Checklists are interesting, but they're a very small piece of the institutional change that this book should really be about. You get a few hints at other pieces through the well-researched examples, but they're only hints.

The Revisionists Revised by Diane Ravitch

Eminently skimmable — Ravitch barely even tries to mount an argument. Instead she just sort of fumes for a hundred pages or so at the radical scholars who dared to point out the invention of school wasn't so nobly motivated. Well, she's come a long way — now she's basically one of them. ([See this piece on her reversal.](#))

[Free at Last: The Sudbury Valley School](#) by Daniel Greenberg

Sudbury has some aspects of magic and nothing conveys them better than this book.

[Learning all the Time](#) by John Holt

[Political Polling](#) by Jeffrey Stonecash

Has some decent stuff on the business side of things — how to write polling reports and get clients and so on.

[The Big Short](#) by Michael Lewis

Oh, what to say about this book? It's well-written, as you'd expect, though no knockout. It tells a fascinating story about some aspects of the crisis, but goes far from unravelling the whole thing.

[How to Win Friends and Influence People](#) (reread) by Dale Carnegie

There's a reason this is a classic. It articulates a way of dealing with people, founded on concern and empathy, and convincingly argues that this kind style is actually the more productive one for getting things done. Instead of yelling at people to do things, you make them *want* to help you. And the book itself is a genius exemplar of this practice. Instead of berating you for being a jerk, like most people would, it persuades you to *want* to change.

[The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks](#) by Rebecca Skloot

Everyone has praised this book, and for good reason — it deftly interweaves an incredible story of science with the heartbreaking tragedy of the people science studies. Nothing earthshattering, but a great piece of writing.

[The Design of Design](#) by Fred Brooks

No deep lasting insights, but it is fascinating to watch Brooks struggle with these questions and it helps you struggle as well.

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[The Case Against Standardized Tests](#) by Alfie Kohn

If you need more reasons to hate standardized tests, this book is full of them.

[When You Were a Tadpole and I Was a Fish](#) by Martin Gardner

In memoriam. In the same way that the spirit of Lenny Bruce passed through Bill Hicks and now Louis CK, the ghost of Feynman passed to Martin Gardner. His wit and curiosity, combined with a gift for explanation, did more than almost anyone to promote a genuine appreciation for math and science. This essay collection was his last book. (Although I'm sure many, many more will come posthumously.)

[Class War?: What Americans Really Think about Economic Inequality](#) by Benjamin Page and Lawrence Jacobs

If the state of politics gets you down about your fellow man, this well-researched scientific book will persuade you that even Americans are egalitarians at heart.

[Getting to Yes](#) by Roger Fisher and William Ury

This book is full of alternate strategies to try, but has very little on the key negotiation question of what to do about distributing the surplus.

[Expert Political Judgment](#) by Philip Tetlock

This book is kind of a bore to read, but the story it tells is fascinating, so [just read Louis Menand's summary](#) instead.

[101 Things I Learned in Business School](#) by Michael W. Preis with Matthew Frederick

A sweet, short book with cute pictures. Smart idea for a series.

[The Way We Were?](#) [\[online\]](#) by Richard Rothstein

A fantastic debunking of the “kids were so much smarter back then” myth.

[The Matthew Effect](#) by Daniel Rigney

Short and unmemorable.

[Taking Economic Seriously](#) by Dean Baker

A nice little summary of Dean's big ideas.

[The Meaning of David Cameron](#) by Richard Seymour

A short book on what's happened to British politics from a radical perspective.

[Managing to Change the World](#) by Allison Green and Jerry Hauser

The best book on the practicalities of management I've ever read. Whereas most books focus on vague and meaningless advice, this book is clear about the nuts and bolts.

[Workers in a Labyrinth](#) by Robert Jackall

Not as great as my favorite book of all-time, Jackall's *Moral Mazes*, but a fascinating look at how normal people make sense of their daily work lives.

Disconnect by Morris Fiorina

Fiorina has no idea what he's talking about in this one; it's completely ridiculous. There was a long period in American politics where, to prevent blacks from voting, southern whites excluded blacks from the Democratic party primary and then always voted for the Democratic nominee in the general. Blacks could legally vote, but only in the general, when it didn't make any difference.

The result was that a whole lot of racist, conservative politicians ended up in the Democratic Party and so politics appeared less polarized — there were conservatives Democrats (and some liberal Republicans) and the conservatives and the liberals could work “across party lines” to get things done.

Eventually the Supreme Court outlawed this noxious practice and the south started sending Republicans to Congress instead. That led to the conservatives leaving the Democratic party (and then the liberal Republicans getting kicked out too) and now when liberals or conservatives all work together, they only need to do so within one party. The result is what appears to be an increase in party polarization. Instead of a couple Democratic liberals and a couple Republican liberals writing a bill, you just get a bunch of Democratic liberals writing a bill.

This is such an obvious explanation and MoFi does his best to ignore it, looking everywhere but the obvious place so he can wonder about the dangers of polarization.

[The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo](#) (1 of 3) by Stieg Larsson

This book has no deep point to make, Nora Ephron has [ably chronicled its stylistic oddities](#), and the plot is more bizarre than compelling. Yet I couldn't put it down. Indeed, I dare say I enjoyed it.

[The Girl who Played with Fire](#) (2 of 3) by Stieg Larsson

[The Girl who Kicked Over the Hornet's Nest](#) (3 of 3) by Stieg Larsson

These two tell a different, and in some ways more interesting story than the first one, but it's not enough to change my fundamental evaluation.

However, I do much prefer the original titles, which translate roughly to: *Men Who Hate Women*, *The Girl Who Played with Fire*, and *The Exploding Social Safety Net*. I guess it's nice when that sort of thing can be a bestseller.

[The Possessed: Adventures with Russian Books and the People Who Read Them](#) by Elif Batuman

Hilarious, brilliant, fantastic. There's no justification for this book being as good as it is. Even I wasn't interested in reading a book about Russian literary scholars, but it's just incredible good and I'm glad I did.

[This is Your Country on Drugs](#) by Ryan Grim

I would not have thought the world needed another book on drugs, but this one turns out to be basically perfect. Comprehensive, erudite, funny, and realistic — Grim definitely inhales.

[Scott Pilgrim's Precious Little Life](#) (1 of 6) by Bryan Lee O'Malley

[Scott Pilgrim's Finest Hour](#) (6 of 6) by Bryan Lee O'Malley

You should *definitely* see the movie and then, if you do see it, it's worth reading the books. The books are much deeper and darker than the movie otherwise lets on. You realize that the film you saw as an example of joy and exuberance is actually incredibly depressing.

By contrast, we will just forget that someone made a movie of *Bonfire of the Vanities*. Yeek.

Rework by Jason Fried and David Heinemeier Hansson

[Delivering Happiness](#) by Tony Hsieh

This book is more the story of Hsieh's insane journey toward creating Zappos than the business advice book it looks like, but that's OK because it's an incredible story and Hsieh's exuberant retelling makes it impossible to put down.

[Meta Math!](#) by Gregory Chaitin

Chaitin makes an obscure field you've never heard of like Algorithmic Information Theory sound interesting and fun, even if you don't know any math.

[Philosophy in a New Century](#) by John Searle

A collection of some great essays by Searle.

The Essential Drucker by Peter Drucker

Drucker sounds like the kind of person I should like, but I've never actually liked him.

Socks by Beverly Cleary

Ramona the Brave by Beverly Cleary

I read these to the seven-year-old, at her insistence. They weren't great, but they were at least tolerable, unlike some of the other stuff she likes.

XKCD, vol. 0 by Randall Munroe

You no doubt already read xkcd online. Yet apparently many people also bought this paper copy. And they said print was dead!

[The Promise: President Obama, Year One](#) by Jonathan Alter

No great revelations, but it is shocking how little actual thought goes on in the Obama White House.

[Microeconomics](#) by Samuel Bowles

A textbook that totally upends the field of classical economics. Sadly, it can be a bit hard to follow, but I wrote [summaries of it here](#).

[All Art is Propaganda: Critical Essays](#) by George Orwell (with introduction by Keith Gessen)

Orwell is magic.

[Toyota Production System](#) by Taiichi Ohno

It's hard to find a better book that describes what lean production, in its original sense, is all about than this translated work from its creator. I hope that Ohno one day gets the recognition he deserves: as one of the world's first pioneers in what is undoubtedly the greatest human art form (with sex running a close second).

[Freedom](#) by Jonathan Franzen

Flashes of greatness mixed with strings of ridiculousness. (This is Franzen's Great American Novel, in case you hadn't heard.) Could have been truly great if Franzen had a great editor, but instead all his indulgences were left in. It's certainly no competition for DFW. (Sorry, Franzen!)

[The Machine that Changed the World: The Story of Lean Production—Toyota's Secret Weapon in the Global Car Wars That Is Now Revolutionizing World Industry](#) by James P. Womack, Daniel T. Jones, and Daniel Roos

Not bad, but feels a bit like reading a book by a bunch of blind men trying to explain the elephant charging toward them.

Conscience of a Liberal by Paul Krugman

Did I really read this book? I don't remember it at all.

[How to Become a Scandal](#) by Laura Kipnis

Kipnis' writing is fun, as always, but there's no real insight here.

[Poisoned for Pennies: The Economics of Toxics and Precaution](#) by Frank Ackerman

A fantastic book on the serious trouble with using mathematical cost-benefit analyses to try to decide when to protect the environment.

Exit, Voice, and Loyalty by Albert O. Hirschman

A disappointment. Perhaps all its insights have become common knowledge since then.

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[Beyond the Hoax](#) by Alan Sokal

Alan Sokal returns again with a book collecting and integrating his papers on the philosophy of science (although there is still some repetition). Sokal's clear thinking on difficult philosophical issues is always appreciated, but this time around I'm convinced that [he's wrong about the Edinburgh set](#). The rest of it is great, though, especially if you haven't read it before. (There's also some good newish stuff too, including some stuff about *Prophets Facing Backward*.)

[Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy](#) by Barbara Ehrenreich

Ehrenreich makes a convincing case for the ecstatic tradition in American life. My only regret is that it lacks a chapter on raves.

[The Mind-Body Problem](#) by Rebecca Goldstein

A nice book about the problem with marrying a genius. See also: the film *Whatever Works*.

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[The \\$12 Million Stuffed Shark: The Curious Economics of Contemporary Art](#) by Don Thompson

This is another book about a weird subject that goes into too much detail. Thompson gives a decent overview of the art market, but then spends too much time getting into obscure detail about the people involved. Modern art sure is weird, though.

[The Cartoon Introduction to Economics](#) by Grady Klein and Yoram Bauman

Funny (especially the intro) and some basic economics, but nothing stupendous on either front.

[When Brute Force Fails](#) by Mark A. R. Kleiman

A fantastic book. More gushing [in my review](#).

[Money for Nothing](#) by John Gillespie and David Zweig

A quick read on why corporate boards suck so very much.

[Ha'Penny](#) (2 of 3) by Jo Walton

[Half a Crown](#) (3 of 3) by Jo Walton

A good fun detective story combined with interesting speculative fiction. (I read the first book, *Farthing*, years ago.)

[Reason and Rationality](#) by Jon Elster

Very, very short.

[An Object of Beauty](#) by Steve Martin

More on the art market. Martin is not a bad novelist, considering everything else he is, but I doubt I would have read the book if it had a different author's name on the cover.

[Shopgirl](#) by Steve Martin

Turns out to be basically the same book, except much creepier since you realize Martin's basically just using the book to work through his guilt about screwing over younger women.

[Good to Great](#) by Jim Collins

Most business books consist of a bunch of wacky ideas dressed up with even wackier names and presented as the Next Big Thing. Jim Collins greatly improves the genre, by replacing the wacky ideas with actual science. (Unfortunately, he continues the tradition of wacky names.)

Collins and his team picked out all Fortune 500 companies that sustained 4x market returns for more than 15 years (the great companies) and went back to find the transition point where they went from earning normal-market returns to their 4x returns. Then they found the most similar company at that transition point and used it as a control. They examined what differed between the great companies and the controls and describe it here. Of course, you have to trust Collins to pick out the right lessons, but the ones he chooses seem like very good ones.

[Good to Great and the Social Sector](#) by Jim Collins

A short little appendix describing how to apply these principles to non-profits.

[Built to Last](#) by Jim Collins and Jerry Porras

This book is very similar to *Good to Great* except it uses even worse science and even worse names. (Clock building? Really? Can't we just call it institution building?) Just read *Good to Great* — the important stuff from this book is presented in its last chapter anyway.

Beyond Entrepreneurship by Jim Collins and William C. Lazier

This book has pretty much no science (although fewer silly names as well). It's just a lazier version of *Built to Last*.

[You Lost Me There](#) by Rosencrans Baldwin

I knew Rosencrans had a novel out, but I was shocked to see it at the checkout counter. But it's great!

Bigfoot: I Not Dead by Graham Roumieu

Not funny.

[The Thick of It: The Missing DoSAC Files](#) by the writers of *The Thick of It*

Not that funny. (*The Thick of It* is one of the top 5 great TV shows of all-time, though.)

[The Lifecycle of Software Objects](#) [\[online\]](#) by Ted Chiang

Read it! Even people who know much more about sci-fi than me agree this is one of the great science fiction books of all time. It's a novel about the ethical issues with AI.

[Dr. Horrible and Other Horrible Stories](#) by Zack Whedon

Definitely funny, though not as great as the show.

[Wrestling With Moses](#) by Anthony Flint

A decent attempt at a biography of Jane Jacobs, though I would have wanted more detail on how she actually did what she did. Caro he is not — either in writing or research.

[Short: Walking Tall When You're Not Tall At All](#) by John Schwartz

Surely you've heard about the studies showing short people don't make as much as tall people. John Schwartz set out to write a book to cheer kids up about this fact, but looking into them he found it wasn't a fact at all. The result is a model of self-help through science and media criticism. Schwartz playfully teaches you enough math and science to be able to debunk the studies and enough personal advice to make a life on your own terms.

Disclosures: I know Rory Stewart, Dean Baker, John Schwartz, Ryan Grim, Randall Munroe, and Charles Karelis. Baker and Karelis provided me with free copies. Ryan Grim and John Schwartz have written about me in other forums.

In the future, I think I should probably do this monthly instead of one huge yearly installment.

You should follow me on twitter [here](#).

January 3, 2011